

Making Friends With the Impostor

Contributed by Paul Clements, MSW, LCSW, & Jennifer A. Clements, Ph.D., MSW, LCSW

As a new social worker, you might be concerned with making mistakes. Sometimes this thought even leads to the belief that maybe you chose the wrong profession or are just not ready to be a social worker. Although classes have added to your knowledge bank and field placements, if supportive, increased your confidence, sometimes there still is that nagging fear of messing up. The concept of this article developed out of many conversations we have had over the years about our social work practice. We recently reflected on those years and hope that the stories (shared by Jennifer Clements) and the recommendations (shared by Paul Clements) will be of help to other social workers. {mosgoogle right}

I (Jennifer) remember very clearly sitting with one of my first clients. She was the mother of a 12-year-old girl, and she was working on new parenting techniques. As I shared some strategies with her, I began thinking that she had to know that I had no idea what I was doing. I left the meeting frustrated, wishing I had read more about parenting, thinking that I should have paid more attention in my classes and feeling as if I would never make it in this field.

Upon returning to my agency, I continued to feel lost. I wanted to process this experience with someone, but I felt intimidated to admit my shortcomings. I certainly did not want to openly tell people that I was unsure of myself. Luckily, I had several great co-workers who were willing to talk out the situation, and they shared that they at one time or another had felt incompetent. In fact, making mistakes is the natural process of learning. There are very few individuals who have not felt unsure of themselves at one time or another. The reality is that those who don't feel that way sometimes are often making the biggest mistakes. This is not a new experience. In fact in 1978, Clance and Imes first documented this and coined the phrase "impostor phenomenon."

Impostor (sometimes spelled "imposter") phenomenon was observed by Clance and Imes (1978) in a study of high achieving individuals who felt as if they were not as intelligent or as skilled as the outside world saw them. These individuals perceived themselves as frauds. They experienced their achievements not as skill, but as luck, and they lived with the fear that given enough questioning, they would be seen as inadequate.

Thinking back to times when I did not have all the answers for the people I worked with helps me to remember some of the most powerful work I have done over my career. There have been instances when taking the time to really reflect and not jump to perfect solutions has led to the client taking the lead. In these situations, the people I am working with have had the space and time to really think out their own solutions, while I focused on believing in their potential.

I was working with a young girl in foster care who had bounced from therapist to therapist. As her foster mother dropped her off for our first meeting, she warned me that Jody* would not talk to therapists. Feeling confident in my abilities, I assured her that I could make it work. Needless to say, Jody said nothing for 50 minutes, despite my best techniques, toys, art supplies, or music. As I walked out of my office to return Jody to her foster mother, I found that old sense of failure creeping back. I sat down with my supervisor and processed the session, and walked away with several great suggestions. Jody returned to my office the next week and again said nothing. Again, I walked back to my supervisor's office, and he asked me what I thought was the strangest question: "Did you ask Jody what she thought might be helpful?"

I had not considered giving Jody the lead in our work. I was the social worker, and I was supposed to have all the answers. But I did not have all the answers; in fact, I had no answers for Jody. So Jody returned again the following week, and I began the session by simply stating, "Well, Jody, I clearly don't have any idea how to get you talking. But I am here for you, when you are ready. If you need me to sit in silence with you, I can do that. But I believe that you have the ability to really talk about things and get to a place where you can feel better." At that point, Jody took some of the art supplies that I had laid out on the table and wrote a poem.

Transfer me, close me out, shut the f%@ door
Just like everyone, you don't want me anymore

It took her 30 minutes to write it, but at the end, she shared it with me—her fear of more abandonment. We talked for the rest of the session, and as I walked her out to her foster mother, Jody shared with her that I told her that I did not know what I was doing. Her foster mother laughed and asked her if anyone really does.

So how do we deal with this discomfort and fears upon entering the field? For that matter, how do we cope with challenges and self-doubt that may creep up on us throughout our careers? Recommendations

1) Trust your knowledge base. Your experience in your bachelor's and/or master's program has given you the basic skills that are necessary as a social worker. Often, it is the expectation of the worker that he or she will have the knowledge necessary to address any situation as it arises. The fact is that there are almost countless scenarios that arise in our profession and often differing opinions among the most prominent of researchers on how to address them. Early in my social work career, I found that when I didn't know the "right" thing to do, I was able to let go of the picture of myself as an expert and true humility arose. This provided a space for the client's empowerment. It was often at these times that my listening skills were the most attuned and I was just there with the client, because I knew that I did not have the answers.

It is also at these times that the lesson of "when in doubt, ask" should be followed. It is important to feel

comfortable asking clients about aspects of their experience that you do not understand. It is also important to ask supervisors and co-workers for help. Asking never means that you don't know enough—it means that you know enough to ask. There will be times when they seek assistance from you as well.

2) Seek out a mentor. Find someone with whom you feel comfortable and who has had more experience in your area of work. The mentor can be a supervisor or a co-worker in your agency. Your mentor should be someone with whom you feel comfortable sharing your insecurities. Often, this is a person who is not afraid to share his or her own experiences of Impostor Phenomenon. This person can provide a non-judgmental ear, help improve your confidence, assist with your skills, and help you set realistic expectations for yourself. Often the most challenging part about obtaining a mentor is being brave enough to admit that you're not sure about your competence. The reaction from the person with whom you share this will tell you if this is the right person for you.

3) Make friends with the impostor. As social workers, we know that almost all maladaptive thoughts and feelings have some adaptive value. Impostor Phenomenon is no different. If you felt over-confident about what you were doing, you probably wouldn't be checking your steps, identifying mistakes, and improving yourself as a social worker. The fact is that your co-workers have all experienced these feelings at some time in their careers, and many at the same time as you. However, like you, they are not going around sharing it with everyone, and a lot of them aren't even admitting it to themselves. The moment that you allow for feelings of insecurity to be there is the time when you can use those feelings to improve your practice.

Impostor Phenomenon often arises in our professional careers when we are new, encounter new tasks, and take on new positions. It's often at these times that we ask ourselves, "Am I really cut out for this?" It is also at these times that we have the greatest opportunities for humility, growth, and human connection. As we become familiar with the impostor within us and comfortable with it, we gain the ability to walk into each situation with a sense of "not knowing." This can break down barriers of communication and offers the greatest opportunity of growth for our clients and us as professionals.

References

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*name changed to protect confidentiality

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